



The Floating Bridge

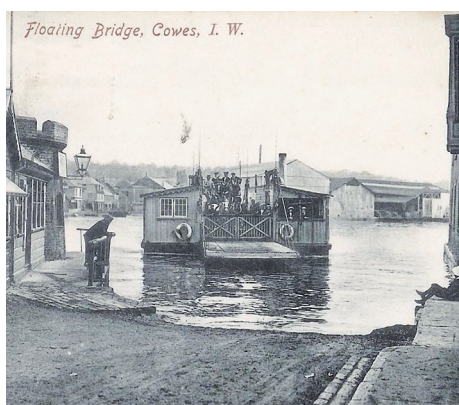
Guest writer Mark Fox continues with his new series looking at different places of historical interest on the Island
 This issue he examines the Cowes chain ferry

As a small child I remember one of the most exciting things about a visit to West Cowes was the short trip on the floating bridge. It made West Cowes seem like a far away and exotic place to go to, having to travel by sea as well as land to reach it. Nowadays my children share something of that early excitement and it is the route we always use. So I must confess to a fondness for the floating bridge.

I like the informal way cars and foot passengers mingle as they move on and off. I like peering through the windows and watching the hustle and bustle of the river and its banks. I like the clunk-clunk-clunk sound as it moves on, speeding up and slowing down, and sometimes stopping altogether if an over eager yachtsmen misjudges a dash past the moving ferry and looks as though it might get caught up in the chains.

The area on both sides of the bank around the ferry have changed significantly over the years, with the decline in industry and the rise in residential accommodation, and yet there is still something permanently reassuring

about the fixed presence of the ferry and those who operate it. I have a huge respect for those who crew the ferry; in all weathers and conditions I've never known



them to be anything less than friendly.

The floating bridge provides a vital road and passenger link across the Medina between the two parts of Cowes. Without it a 10-mile car journey via Newport is involved to go from one side to the other. The first floating bridge was started in 1859. Before that ferrymen plied backwards and forwards carrying people

and goods. In the very early days a floating pontoon was hauled back and forth by men and horses.

It started life as a private company and over time various local authorities have owned and operated it. It is remarkable to think that the current floating bridge, built in 1975, is only the eighth to have been in operation since the service started. The floating bridges are named by number. The current one is called 'Floating Bridge 5' because it is the fifth one under the current owners.

The floating bridge is an increasing rare example of a chain ferry still in operation. Many others have been replaced by bridges or tunnels. The service is reliable and dependable, and that matters to everyone who uses it. Only occasionally does an exceptional high or low tide interrupt the service.

The Cowes Floating Bridge is a fixture and feature of the community around it, valued and appreciated by all those who use it. It is hard to see it being replaced by a bridge or a tunnel. And who, really, would want that anyway?